

Charting the Carnavalesque in R.K.Narayan's novel *Swami and Friends*

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Abstract

The paper applies the theory of the carnivalesque as developed by the Russian philosopher and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin to R.K.Narayan's novel *Swami and Friends* to illustrate that such a reading produces truths which are open-ended and opens spaces in the fabric of society to reveal the relativity of the so called authoritative reality. Carnival promises freedom, change and renewal from rigidly eternal categories. It rattles the authoritative version of language and values, making room for multiplicity of voices and meanings. The novel thus celebrates a riot of perspectives and views which resists the dominance of a single meaning and fosters a heterogeneous world. The perspective of the child Swaminathan acts as a challenge to the authoritarian stand points of the official world of parents, teachers school, priests etc. Narayan's work lends itself effectively to bring out the multi-voiced nature of reality through the outlook of its young protagonist Swaminathan. Carnival shake-ups harbour a change from principles of stability and closure to constant possibility and open-endedness.

Key words: carnivalesque, heteroglossia, centripetal and centrifugal forces , multi-voicedness, closure, authoritarian, relativity.

The innate habit of canonization privileges of certain kind of literary texts over others and comedy is frequently relegated to lower order of importance. This assumption is challenged in the writings and theory of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. His concepts provide new tools for analysis for the study of fiction in the Post- Structuralist context. The increasing relevance of Bakhtin is borne out by Michael Holquist's observation in his book 'Dialogism' that "he is now among the three most frequently cited authors in manuscripts submitted to PMLA(Dialogism,p.195) Bakhtin's theories on the novel and on language as propounded way back in 1920s &1930s addresss every critical question raised in Literary Theory and criticism since the New Critics.He is remarkable that he has considered every position that has been confounding the Structuralists and The Post- Structuralists theorists decades before such questions were even enunciated. Bakhtin coined the word 'carnivalization' which he introduced in his book "The Dialogic Imagination' (trnsl in1981)to "describe the penetration or incorporation of carnival into everyday life, and its shaping effect on language and literature"(Cuddon,p.111). Bakhtin proposes the theory that the element of carnival in literature is subversive; 'it disrupts authority and introduces alternatives' (Cuddon,p.111). Carnival in literature is thus a liberating influence and is seen by Bakhtin as a part of subversion of the sacred word in Renaissance literature, in Socratic dialogues and in the Menippean satire. His outstanding theory of the carnivalesque affirms the language of laughter as a much needed antidote for ideological abstractions. The theory of the carnivalesque propounded in Mikhail Bakhtin's doctoral thesis which was later published as 'Rabelais and his World' argued that the social institution of the carnival demonstrated the role of humour to produce a festive perception of the world which constituted a second life of people beyond and outside the seriousness of officialdom. In the theory of the carnival grotesque the lower bodily strata-eating, birthing , defecation and the like serve as a medium which challenge the powerful. Carnival's capacity to bring about social transformation is elaborated by the anthropologist Victor Turner. He considers the polyphonic multi-voiced novel creates democratic spaces for the smallest voice to be heard and leads the novel away from monological tendencies. Bakhtin traces the origin of the dialogical novel in the folk tradition of the carnival festivities where taboos were broken and the official institutions were mocked at. The carnival celebrated the body and the materiality that sorrounds it, a fact that is

ignored by the so called serious writings. The carnivalesque literary mode parallels the flouting of authority and inversion of social hierarchies that was permitted by many cultures during the carnival festival. One of the ways it brings about this inversion of hierarchies and defying of authority is by “introducing a mingling of voices from diverse social levels that are free to mock and subvert authority, to flout social norms by ribaldry and to exhibit various ways of profaning what is ordinarily regarded as sacrosanct(Abrams, p.63)This paper in its attempts to re-read the novel *Swami and Friends* from a carnivalesque perspective helps to prevent centralization of meaning and leaves the novel open-ended.

The celebrated novel of R.K Narayan *Swami and Friends* is the first part of his trilogy called the “Malgudi Omnibus”, the other novels in this trilogy being *The Bachelor of Arts* and *The English Teacher*. The title ‘*Swami and Friends*’, of this first novel by R.K.Narayan was suggested by Graham Greene who came in contact with R.K Narayan and helped him with its publication in the year 1935. It is a hilarious and episodic novel which describes the adventures of a group of school boys Swami and his friends, and is set in early 1930s colonial India. In 2011 The Guardian acclaimed it to be “one of the world’s best English novels by an Indian author”. The charm of the novel refuses to fade away and has delighted many generations of readers. The novel is partly autobiographical as Narayan was himself, like the 10 year old protagonist Swaminathan, is brought up by his grandmother and like Swami was schooling in the 1930s. The book set in a fictitious South Indian town of Malgudi, portrays with genial humour, simplicity and grace the peculiarities of human relationships and life as seen through the eyes of its 10 year old child who with his friends is trying to cope with the challenges that life throws and trying to make sense of the adult world . R. K. Narayan, had once described Malgudi as a town "habited by timeless characters who could be living anywhere in the world". Swami is a class two student at the British established Albert Mission School which stresses Christianity, English literature and value education. The novel appears to resonate with Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque whose most important characteristic is its parodic nature, questioning of traditional authority, and challenging the established norms of social behaviour and forms of logic. The novel is presented through the eyes of this 10-12 year child Swami and his child logic challenges the authoritarian word of his father, his school and the adult world in general. For Bakhtin a fictional work is primarily dialogic and multi-voiced. Knowledge is also conceived in a similar dialogical manner-

which addresses rather than something which defines. Narayan's novel through the voice of Swaminathan (Swamy) as well as his friends brings forth an alternative epistemology that of a child's perspective in an adult world; for what is important is not the way in which a novel reflects the society but the manner in which language in the novel disrupts authority and liberates alternative voices.

While the family, the parents and the school all try to impose on the children a monological world with single authoritative meaning; the children refuse to accept the given singular meaning and reveal alternative modes of thought, creating a dialogical world. Right at the beginning of the novel the class room which is an instrument of inculcating the official word to the child is for Swamy a place from where he "could watch toddlers of Infant Standards falling over one another, and through the window to the left see the 12:30 mail gliding over the embankment, booming and rattling while passing over the Sarayu Bridge" (7). When he is given a maths problem which mentions mangoes to be solved he is busy imagining the taste and the smell of the delicious fruit .What are mathematical sums for Swami's father become delectable fruit for Swami who gets lost in imagining their succulent flavour and their mouth-watering taste The friends and Swami constantly encounter the grown up world that tries to curtail their cheerful riotousness. The authoritative world consists of the parents, school teachers, doctors, policemen gatekeepers and other guardians. The large and repressive school building with its fastidious teachers, strict classification of time in periods divided into subjects, disciplining teachers meeting out corporal punishments and a rigorous examination system all try to coerce the children into accepting a unified, singular authoritative discourse of generally acknowledged truths of the official line. In the history of literary language there is a constant struggle between the two forces- the centripetal and the centrifugal, according to Bakhtin . These are respectively the centralizing and the decentralizing forces in language and culture- centripetal is the homogenizing, hierarchizing influence while centrifugal are the dispersing, de-crowning forces which according to Bakhtin are manifested through the clowns, mimics and rogues. The world of children can be categorized as another centre for the operation of these centrifugal powers in culture and language. The carnival spirit can be witnessed in the manner Swami attempts his examination. "Out of the six questions set he had answered the first to his satisfaction, second was doubtful, third was satisfactory, fourth was clearly wrong ... the sixth was the best of the lot. It took him only a minute to answer

it...the question was what do you infer from the story of the Brahmin and the Tiger?" The story being that a brahmin is offered a gold bangle by a tiger who is on the other edge of a pond. The Brahmin at first declines but after the tiger entreats him with lot of sincere promises, the Brahmin wades through the water and before he could hold out his hand for the bangle his devoured by the tiger. Swami's response is a classic case of how the child's imagination forges other meanings than those the authoritative institutions wish to inculcate. "Swaminathan had never thought that this story had contained a moral. But now he felt it must have one since the question paper mentioned it. He took a minute to decide whether the moral was: 'we must never accept when it is offered by a tiger' or 'love of gold bangle cost one one's life'. He saw more logic in the latter and wrote it down." (p51). His reasoning produces an alternative reality and challenges the absolute morals of the so called perfect moral order of things as is projected in ethics and moral science.

A wonderful description of the carnival atmosphere is found in Chapter 9 School Breaks up . The student's carnival sense of freedom challenges, defies and resists all that the school taught- discipline, manners and etiquettes.

"At the end of the prayer the storm burst. With the loudest lustiest cries, the gathering flooded out of the hall in one body. All through this vigorous confusion and disorder Swaminathan kept close to Mani. For there was a general belief in the school that enemies stabbed each other on the last day". (p.53)

The rowdiness, unruliness and disruptiveness of this breaking of school for the summer vacations is filled with carnival overtones:

"Mani did some brisk work at the school gate, snatching from all sorts of people ink-bottles and pens, and destroying them. Around him was a crowd shrieking with excitement and joy. Ecstatic shrieks went up as each article of stationary was destroyed. One or two little boys protested. But Mani wrenched the ink bottles from their hands, tore their caps, and poured ink over their clothes. He had a small band of assistants, among whom Swaminathan was prominent."(54)

The carnival situation is all embracing with the painting of the face which acts as a mask which liberates the mask bearer's soul from any social compulsions of propriety.

“Overcome by the mood of the hour he spontaneously emptied the ink – bottle over his own head and had drawn frightful dark circles under his eyes with the dripping ink.” (p.54)

This episode resonates with a similar scene in the novel by William Golding’s “*Lord of the Flies*”. Jack, Ralph and other children who are marooned on the deserted island similarly paint their faces resulting in their metamorphosis into creatures full of evil potentialities. In the novel *Swami and Friends* however, this face painting is an expression of freedom from the repressive atmosphere of the school a reversal of the civilized into primitive. In their joyous revelry they even dare to playfully crack jokes with the ultimate bearers of official authority – the police. Mani shouts at a policeman passing by “oh, policeman, policeman! Arrest these boys!”(54) Clark and Holquist have remarked that mask is the very image of ambiguity, the variety and flux of identities that otherwise are considered as fixed and single.

The carnival laughter laughs at the official ideologies and at the same time it does not spare itself from self -ridicule. Clark and Holquist have maintained that

“In creating a relativity of speech practices, Rabelais relativizes world views, all of which seek hegemony and claim unique privilege. He carnivalizes language itself and in doing so, ‘decrown’ the authority that official ideologies seek to claim for themselves within the isolation of their characteristic discourses (Clark and Holquist, p.318)

In Narayan’s novel what is a simple problem of fractions to Swaminathan’s father becomes a real life situation to Swaminathan. “Rama has ten mangoes with which he wants to earn fifteen annas. Krishna wants only four mangoes . How much will Krishna have to pay?”(p.70). The problem stumps Swami completely. “He gazed and gazed at this sum and every time he read it, it acquired new meaning” (70). His moth begins to water at the thought of mangoes. He keeps imagining what made Ram fix a price of fifteen annas for the mangoes and what kind of person was Rama. He also begins to wonder whether the Rama and Krishna were friends like his friends Shankar and Pea. He feels a kind of sympathy for Krishna when he imagines Krishna to be like Pea and Rama to be like Shankar. Unable to solve the sum he asks his father whether the mangoes were ripe or raw. This child’s view of a mathematical sum creates a diverse reality which is equally valid and legitimate. For Swami the question about how much Krishna will have to pay is irrelevant. A deep suspicion arises in his mind

that Rama is trying to sell unripe mangoes to Krishna. So what is a basic maths problem for Swamin's father assumes for Swami a totally new dimension and facet of reality. The intertwining of the authoritative world of the parent and the childish one of Swami create a shifting instability of meaning thus undermining the authority of the parental discourse.

In another interesting episode when the friends form a cricket club and place an order for bats balls, and other cricketing gear to Messrs. Binns. The reply that they receive from Binns stumps them completely. They take the reply to be a formal acceptance of their team and captain as well as by Binns and the post office "His Majesty's Post Office has recognized their team" (p.95). In their reply Binns thanks them for the order but says that they "would be much obliged to him if he could remit 25 percent with the order and balance could be paid against the VPP of the railway receipt" (95) . The friends are totally confounded by this letter and spent a lot of time in deliberating whether Binns will supply them with the goods or not. They look up the dictionary to get the meaning of the word 'obliged' but they get more and more confused. They feel that their letter to Binns contained nothing to warrant words like 'obliged' 'remit' and 'twenty-five percent'. In conclusion they write to the Binns company saying "We are very sorry you sent me somebody's letter. Please send our things immediately" (p.95)

The episode shows the difference in understanding between an adult and children and pitches a uniform meaning against the world of children.

Children are eternal protestors against institutions that stand as symbols of legitimate authority. They stand in a subversive relation to the world of adults which represents serious official world constituted of school teachers, law makers police force, priests etc. Relatively free from the theorised world of the academician, the imaginative potential of the child questions the definitive ways of seeing and provides a joyful relativity to the monological official view of things. They force us to see the limitations of a linear vision of things.

Carnival in literature creates a gap in the fabric of society and since the dominant ideology seeks to project the social order as a unified text, fixed and complete, the carnival forever poses a threat to these assumptions. Carnival promises freedom, change and renewal from

rigid eternal categories. The novel thus celebrates a riot of perspectives and views which resists the dominance of a single meaning and fosters a heterogeneous world.

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